Increasing 'Initial' Focus-on-Form to Practice, Promote, and Automatize Target Function Language Use

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ABSTRACT

Functions are directly-taught conversation skills that facilitate deep communicative interaction by helping learners perform direct pragmatic speech acts. On the author's course, functions are operationalized through limited sets of pre-packaged language, positioned as formal input. Although discussion tasks are highly meaning-focused occasions, functional language is introduced to support, plan, and aid in the interchange of ideas. However, as learners may enter the program with a declarative knowledge of how to express themselves, given their prior experiences of 8 years of EFL education, learners may lack the ability to deliver messages using a heightened variety of forms that perform extended functions.

This paper will introduce an approach to practice that encourages an intensive, overt, and pre-emptive 'focus-on-form,' that extends and maintains accurate target form-function use amongst learners. The writer will argue that initially removing the burden of content development can support these aims.

LITERATURE REVIEW

'Focus-on-form,' according to Long (1991) involves drawing "students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on the meaning of communication" (pp. 45-46), while Ellis (2005) believes that focus-on-form pedagogically involves "attempts to intervene in the process of acquisition by inducing learners to pay attention to a particular form while they are primarily concerned with decoding or encoding message content" (p. 9). This appears to be in contrast to 'meaning-focused' instruction, which is argued as being "predicated on the assumption that linguistic knowledge is acquired through communication rather than through direct instruction" (Ellis, Basturken, and Loewen 2002, p. 407). In the classroom, a focus-on-form approach can be either planned or unplanned, with a planned focus-on-form utilizing a specific pre-selected form for attention prior to the lesson. The authors's program largely follows what could be considered a notional-functional approach, in that "an inventory of functions are covered at different levels of a language teaching program" (Robinson, 2009, p. 297), with a synthetic exposure to a "deliberately limited sample of language" (Wilkins, 1976, p. 2). Therefore, a planned focus-on-form appears to correspond to the nature of the course, as interactive tasks are developed to provide a context for use of the planned form (Shintani, 2012). In discoursal terms, Ellis (2005) states that a focus-on-form can also be said to use pre-emptive devices in the way it draws interlocutors' attentions to form in meaning-prioritized interaction. Explicit instruction such as corrective feedback (Lyster and Ranta, 1997), and communicative drills (Richards, Platt, and Weber, 1985), all help towards learners' noticing linguistic forms. In addition to being both planned and explicit, Doughty and Williams (1998) describe how activities can be obtrusive and unobtrusive, "reflecting the degree to which the focus on form interrupts the flow of communication" (p. 258). An obtrusive focus helps learners to understand early on that they are attending to a specific form, and not on the interchange of meaning. Ellis, Basturken, and Loewen (2002) claim that adult learners lack the same access that children do to language acquisition, and that learners "need to call on general inductive learning mechanisms" (p. 409) to give conscious attention to linguistic forms. This view is underpinned by Schmidt's (1994) 'Noticing Hypothesis', which stipulates that learners

need to notice forms consciously that would otherwise be ignored, and that noticing is a conscious process that needs to be induced.

Studies into the nature of pre-task planning have sought to establish the effectiveness of various approaches to practice, affording educators the clarity and impetus to pedagogically manipulate classroom processes (Pica, 1997). Three aspects of speech have been established as measurements of oral production in relation to task characteristics: complexity, accuracy, and fluency (Ellis and Barkhuizen, 2005). Complexity describes a speaker's "willingness to use more challenging and difficult language" (Skehan, 2001, p. 5). Accuracy, according to Lambert and Kormos (2014), relates to the "ratio of errors in a text to some unit of production," and to the "proportion of these units that are error free" (p. 609). Finally, fluency can be measured through the "number of filled pauses and unfilled pauses," as well as "words or syllables per minute" (Nation and Newton, 2009, p. 151). Skehan's (2001) 'Trade-off Hypothesis' argues that cognitively attending to one area may draw attention away from another, and that ultimately a task that focuses on one area may detract from others, for example aspects of complexity, accuracy, fluency. Skehan's hypothesis therefore assumes that learners possess a limited processing capacity, manifested in a trade-off. In contrast, Robinson (2001) proposes a multiple-resources view of processing, which views "structural complexity and functional complexity not in competition," but "closely connected," resulting in "increased output" (Ellis, 2005, p. 16). Ortega (2005) provides a counterargument to both Skehan's and Robinson's models, claiming that tasks alone are not solely responsible for producing the conditions for oral L2 production. Ortega asks educators to "consider the full landscape of variables contributed by task, learner, and linguistic outcomes" (p. 108) as interrelated components. Assessing the learner variable to planning activities, Ortega found through post-interviews that learners showed an ability to "utilize various funds of explicit knowledge that guide their conscious attentions towards areas in which they are well aware of holes and gaps" (p. 105). Therefore, form and meaning may not be separated in a dichotomy, but learning can take place by attending to 'form-in-meaning.' Sangarun (2005) feels that tailoring practice tasks to having form-in-meaning, or a combined form/meaning focus, provided the "optimal balance of attention between the planning of meaning and the planning of form" (p. 132). Sangarun's beliefs are based on analyses of learner speech quality in undertaking planning tasks that were meaning-, form-, or meaning/form-focused.

Both Ortega (2005) and Sagarun (2005) appear to reflect an earlier concept devised by Gatbonton and Segalowitz (1988). The writers address automaticity as being a component of fluency, in that "knowing what to say, to whom and when" and "producing utterances rapidly and smoothly" (p. 474) marks a successful and proficient language speaker. If an interlocutor needs an "inordinate amount of time to formulate an utterance", it could be said they lack fluency. However, to reach a level of fluency where one can operate without an "investment of psychological resources" (p. 475), Gatbonton and Segalowitz call for particular tasks that promote the 'Creative Automatization' of routinized utterances, not as grammatical wholes, but with an awareness of appropriate uses in particular communicative situations. Activities that "enable learners to practice (repeat) many tokens of target sentences while they are engaged in real communication" (p. 479) can be said to be characteristic of the approach that the two writers advocate. The challenge for teachers then is to create in the learners "a need to use target utterances repetitively while conveying genuine messages" (p. 480) and allow for "consistent speaking practice with the selected utterances" (p. 482). In the latter sections of this essay, the writer will introduce a tentative plan for a practice activity that focuses on the target form, before allowing for further creative automatization of the newly presented target phrases.

Summarizing the studies in field, it appears that a planned and pre-emptive focus-on-form aids in the acquisition of target linguistic forms amongst adult EFL learners (Schmidt, 1994). In addition, pedagogical manipulation on the part of the teacher may go some way to maintaining and facilitating realisation and use of specific forms. However, studies have shown that form with meaning can bring about positive effects on oral production (Ortega, 2005; Sagarun, 2005), but that creative automatization must be undertaken before form can be realized and operated with meaning (Gatbonton and Segalowitz, 1988). It appears then, that the target forms of the lesson (in this case, direct pragmatic functions), should be arguably the central aim of 'initial' practice, affording learners ample opportunities to attend to the form-function at the start of the pre-task lesson stage.

TASK AND MATERIALS

As functional language can be regarded as directly-taught conversation skills, which are operationalized through limited sets of pre-packaged language, this approach can be applied to any form that has been pre-selected for specific input and practice in a contextual environment of the reader's choosing. In this example, the author has chosen the discussion-related functions of 'Reporting Information,' and 'Asking Others to Report Information.' With forms such as 'I heard…', 'I saw…', and '(x) said...' performing the former function, and interrogatives like 'Where did you hear that?' and 'How do you know about that?' operating the latter. This function facilitates the use of exterior information in discussions to support participants' opinions and beliefs around a topic.

There are three main stages to this form-focused approach. The first requires learners to be made aware of a form to be practiced through a dialogue comparison. This involves the learners noticing how the inclusion of a new form-function can improve and enhance an interactive scenario, by making its omissions clear and easy to realize. As a dialogue comparison is already an established approach amongst instructors teaching on the writer's program, this will not be detailed in the following procedure; however, the author feels a dialogue comparison to be more conducive to effective form-focused practices, and for the most part functions as the first stage of noticing target forms.

The second stage of this form-focused process is designed to encourage repetition of the specific form focused on (see Appendix A). Here, the function phrases have been removed multiple times, allowing for two things to happen: (1) The learners notice the gap and realize the pragmatic location in an example interchange; (2) The learners are induced into repeating the function phrase multiple times. In the final stage, posters (see Appendix B) are used to provide freer use of the function phrases; however, content is still provided, and repetition of the form encouraged. As was mentioned previously, this activity can theoretically be used with any number of target forms; however, the author has chosen a particular group of functions to demonstrate the process. The materials provided should give a clear indication as to how the theory reviewed in the previous section relates to classroom practice.

PROCEDURE

1) Upon the learners being made aware of the communicative shortcomings through the use of a dialogue comparison and being formally introduced to the function phrases both through teacher explanation and whiteboard presentations, arrange the group into pairs and hand out one worksheet between two (see Appendix A).

2) Assign one learner as 'A' and the other as 'B' with the former being the speaker and the latter

the listener. Encourage the learners to read the first dialogue together; as they do so, they will realize there are blank spaces. Briefly gesturing to the board, encourage the learners to complete the gaps with a suitable speaker or listener phrase accordingly from the board.

3) Encourage the learners to swap roles and complete the second dialogue in the same manner. As the dialogues continue through 3 to 5, the emphasis changes to focus on extended use of the target function; however, repetition within the dialogues continues to remain intense throughout.

4) Having focused on form through targeted repetition of the phrases sought for completion of freer discussions later in the lesson, the learners are now ready to use the phrases in a more creative, yet still controlled manner. Encourage the learners to stand up in two lines facing one another. Assign one side as listeners and the other as speakers.

5) Hand the listeners a different poster each (see Appendix B), making sure that their poster is facing towards the speaker. Prompt the speakers to read the information written on the poster. This should induce the listeners to ask for the source of such information by using one of the target phrases on the board. At this stage, the speakers must then look at the visual prompt provided to them on each poster before reporting the source of information. For instance, if the information is enclosed within a television screen, the speaker should say, "I saw it on TV."

6) Repeat this process so that everyone has the chance to both ask for, and report, information with different partners and different sources of information.

7) At this stage, the learners have had the chance to focus on form in a highly controlled and repetitive manner, and have additionally automatized the target phrases in a follow-up activity that encouraged the learners to convey genuine messages to one another. The final stage of this practice process is to have the learners discuss a topic under time constraints and conditions so that all participants use the target phrases in a freer manner.

VARIATIONS

Regarding stage 5, added structure could be provided to this activity to further maintain repeated and extended use of all function phrases by both the speakers and listeners. However, as the aim of this stage is to provide an opportunity for automatization of the target forms, this variation should be used selectively. Firstly, gauge how well the learners use the target language in stages 3 and 4, before monitoring how the learners initially take to using the function forms in stage 5. If the learners appear to need more form-focused practice, the following example structure could be presented on the board for the speaker and listeners to briefly follow. This variation has been tested with a variety of the writer's classes over the previous semester:

A: In my opinion, _____ is / isn't a kind / hard-working celebrity.
B: How come?
A: It's mainly because, I heard. . .
B: Really! How do you know about that? / Where did you hear that?
A: I . . .

Figure 1. Variation of Stage 5

DISCUSSION

The writer decided to place a great emphasis on 'initial' focus-on-form during the pre-task practice stages of the lesson for a variety of target-functions that were introduced on his program. These pedagogical shifts came about in response to the writer's earlier attempts to provide an opportunity for the learners to use newly presented form-function immediately in meaning-focused activities. Previous studies in the field (Skehan, 2001; Robinson, 2001; Ellis, 2005; Long, 1991) suggest that this may not be the optimum approach for helping learners automatize target forms. Even though studies by Ortega (2005), Sangarun (2005), and Gatbonton and Segalowitz (1988) claim and provide some evidence for the benefits of a form-in-meaning approach, reaching this stage must be gradual, with extensive and repetitive, content-restricted practice of the target-forms coming just before.

Although more extensive studies may need to be carried out to test the reliability and validity of claiming that an 'initial' focus on form may be of greater benefit than practicing the use of functions 'on-line' (Ellis, 2005), whilst developing content, casual classroom observations conducted by the author attempt to add some weight to his beliefs. The following table shows the frequency of target function use amongst four classes, two of which took place prior to the author changing his approach. The data from the two 'Spring 2013' groups were recorded by the author observing class notes taken during the lessons, while the 'Fall 2014' data was collected by the author physically listening to instances of function use during the class. The data was collected from the first discussion tasks only, with the 'total instance of use' collectively referring to accurate instances of speaker and listener varieties of each target function:

Table 1. Total form-function use before and after 'initial' focus-on-form activities

Semester and Year		Function	Total Instances of Use	Learners
1	Spring 2013	Reasons	7 instances	8
2	Spring 2013	Joining a Discussion	19 instances	8
3	Fall 2014	Reporting Information	30 instances	7
4	Fall 2014	Experiences	32 instances	8

This data shows an increased use of target functions in discussion one amongst all class members. The writer also observed far more equal use of both speaker and listener sides of the function, with instances of function use spread evenly amongst all learners. Although more expansive and substantial analyses must be sought to support the writer's claims, 'initial' focus on form activities have had a decidedly positive effect on the performance of the learners that the author used this approach with.

CONCLUSION

According to Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005), functional language can be used as a measure of language complexity. In particular, form-function analyses can be undertaken to "provide

another tool for examining and explaining variability in learner language," while striving to examine "form with a view to explicating the functions it maps on to" (p. 120). However, Nemeth and Kormos (2001) believe that "very little is known about the pragmatic aspects of task-performance" (p. 214), with the exception of a handful of studies. For example, Brown (1991) found the function of 'hypothesizing' to be prevalent amongst a variety of group-work activities. The writer included this as a category of analysis that aimed to "tally the occurrences of participants emitting a hypothesis," before expressing these instances as percentages within token unit (T-unit) in each task (p. 7). Amongst other results, Brown found that 12.4% of total task utterances performed the function of hypothesizing. Therefore, it appears that using the aspect of form-function to reflect language complexity can be used as an approach to measure the effectiveness of various pre-task planning conditions. However, more detailed data would need to be collected in potential studies. Reporting instances of use alone does not take into account other variables of task performance and planning. However, what this study has attempted to argue is that an 'initial' focus-on-form can help learners not only notice target forms more easily, but promote more frequent use when carrying out meaning-focused discussion tasks.

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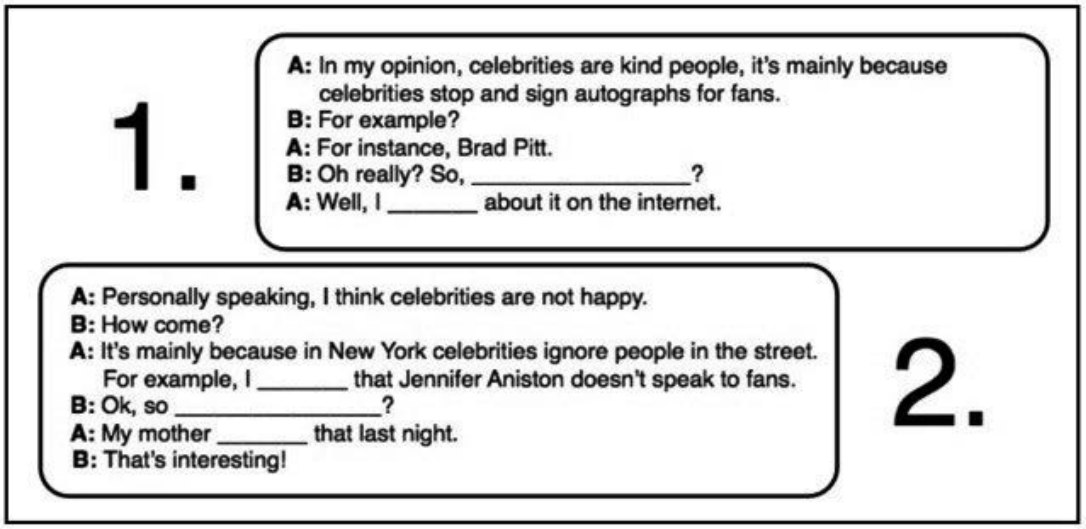
APPENDIX A



APPENDIX B